

Sustaining Food Tourism Networks: Barriers and Facilitators

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INTRODUCTION

According to Hall and Williams (2008), innovation in the tourism sector can be viewed as linking tourism products and services in novel ways. Food tourism networks have emerged in various destinations worldwide and serve as an innovative means of bundling products and services already in existence into new packages of interest to tourists.

Networks are a type of collaborative entity comprised of actors (individuals or organisations), activities and resources. Relationships are developed between actors as they build up activity links and resource ties (Johnsen et al 2008). This paper examines some of the barriers and facilitators to collaboration by drawing on the results of a research study which examined three networks in the Southwest region of Ireland.

BACKGROUND

Ireland's food industry is already capitalising on the perception of Ireland as natural, green and pure. Irish organic smoked salmon, for example, is currently being sold in Europe at a higher premium than Norwegian and Scottish organic smoked salmon (Grant Thornton 2012). This suggests that Ireland's *destination brand* of natural and pure can be leveraged to develop Ireland as a destination for tourists seeking experiences related to high quality, natural food products. In light of this opportunity, Fáilte Ireland has developed a *National Food Tourism Implementation Framework*. Within the framework, the importance of developing and promoting Ireland as a food tourism destination is emphasised.

Food tourists want to experience a sense of place through food which means that to provide this experience, high quality, good value, authentic local food, as well as Irish cuisine, must be available. Therefore, those interested in developing food tourism must aim to enhance visitors' experiences of food by ensuring that their expectations with regard to availability, variety and value of local foods are met and exceeded. Integral to this aim is the development of food-related events and ensuring a consistently high quality of food and food tourism related offerings.

Food tourism networks play an important role in this development process. They aim to provide benefits for individuals as well as the region as a whole by building collaborative relationships between food producers and tourism providers. Being involved in a network can bring advantages but the process of developing and sustaining networks is not always an easy one (Huxham and Vangen 2005). Collaboration is mired in ambiguity and complexity and there are a wide range of factors that can act as barriers and facilitators (Willumsen 2008).

Differences in organisational cultures and professional perspectives are commonly cited reasons for difficulties with collaboration, as these differences result in distinctive value systems, language, tools and behaviours that may be difficult to reconcile (Gray 2008). Similarly, a lack of trust between individuals has often caused difficulties because without trust, individuals find it difficult to engage in open discussions and decision-making (Huxham and Vangen 2005). Power disparities can also be problematic as collaboration has shared decision-making and shared power at its heart (Willumsen 2008). A threat of a loss of power can cause individuals to behave in a way to guard against that happening (Tajfel and Turner 1986). Confusion about role boundaries can also be problematic, as without clarity, individuals may find themselves working at cross-purposes (Zeilstra 2003). Similarly, mutually agreed goals provide direction (Mitchell 2011).

METHODOLOGY

An action research approach was taken in the study. Action research is a collaborative approach where both researcher and participants are involved in the research. The aim is to generate practical solutions to practical issues while simultaneously engaging in reflection and learning in order to produce research findings (Greenwood and Levin 2007).

The researchers engaged with three networks between March and November 2012. The first, referred to throughout this paper as Network A, was a food tourism network. Network B was a food festival network and Network C was a food producer's network. The networks are not identified by name because participants were guaranteed confidentiality and anonymity. The three networks were chosen as each included the development of food tourism within their strategic plan. To address this strategic aim, the networks in the study engaged in a number of activities such as organising networking events in order to develop collaborative relationships between food producers and food providers, marketing locally produced food and developing food tourism related experiences such as food trails and food festivals.

Data was collected using semi-structured interviews with stakeholders as well as participant observation during network committee meetings and during several activities. Twenty eight current and past committee members of the networks were interviewed and four interviews were conducted with national and local agency personnel. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and field notes were captured during and after participant observation. The qualitative data analysis package, NVivo7 (QSR International 2006) was used to analyse the data consistent with the thematic analysis approach described by Miles and Huberman (1994).

FINDINGS

Each of the three networks in the study had a core steering committee. There were a number of characteristics of these committees that acted as barriers or facilitators to collaboration. These features were associated with the people involved, committee practices, structural elements of the committees and environmental influences and are summarised in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Characteristics of Steering Committees which Impact on Collaboration

- **The People**
 - Motives for Committee Membership
 - Volunteers from Different Sectors
- **The Practices**
 - Agreeing on a Strategic Vision
 - Agreeing on Clear and Achievable Objectives
 - Developing an Atmosphere of Trust and Safety
 - Achieving Clarity in Roles and Responsibilities
 - Taking Ownership
 - Learning from Experience
- **The Structures**
 - Degree of Formality
 - Size
 - Financing
- **The Environment**
 - Support from public agencies
 - Collaboration between public agencies

The people

Motives for Committee Membership

There were different motivations for joining the network committees and these were aligned on a spectrum of altruistic motivations on one end and individualistic motivations on the other. Participants nearer the altruistic end of the spectrum tended to focus on benefits to the community as a whole while those nearer the individualistic end focused on personal benefits that could be gained from committee membership. Most participants voiced mixed motivations as highlighted by one committee member:

If we can get enough emphasis on the Network, our hoteliers might start buying more, we might get people onto the wheel who could set up a distribution centre where people could drop off their food and there could be centralised collection. We'd all benefit; I'd benefit! (Interview, Case Study C).

An individual's motivations for joining a committee influenced their degree of involvement. This is important because the degree to which people are prepared to commit to network activities has been shown to impact on network success (Von Friedrichs Gransjo & Gummesson 2006, Mitchell 2011).

Volunteers from Different Sectors

Network committees were for the most part made up of volunteers from the community. The benefits of this approach were highlighted by participants:

The committee work really well together because nobody was dragged into the committee; we were volunteers (Interview, Case Study B)

Nevertheless, there were difficulties associated with the time demands of committee membership and a paid co-ordinator or paid administrative support was proposed as a solution.

So while all [the committee members] are very proactive, they are also the busiest people in the town. So it really, to be taken to the next level, we need someone that is in a paid position, who can

actually dedicate time.....Because anyone that's involved with this is really involved in other committees and stuff and work takes over, the season is so busy, which is great but it means that your time is limited (Interview, Case Study A).

Having one person in a paid role can be advantageous but findings indicate that there can also be some difficulties with this approach. Firstly, funding to hire an individual must be obtained. Secondly, there are pitfalls associated with volunteers abdicating much of their decision-making and responsibilities to the co-ordinator. On the occasions where responsibility for taking actions related to network activities was left mostly to one person, this negated much of the potential benefits of collaboration, suggesting that committee members must ensure that they remain actively involved in decision-making and activities.

Findings indicate that it is important to have an array of stakeholders on a network steering committee. Although, previous research indicates that this may cause difficulties due to different attitudes and business perspectives (Beech and Huxham 2003, Mitchell 2011), the positive aspects of being able to draw from a wide range of knowledge and experience were emphasised by participants:

Well at the moment there are differences in perspectives. But it has been more helpful than hurtful at the moment, because you are forced to think about the big picture (Interview, Case Study C).

Thus, sectoral differences did not cause major difficulties with collaboration. This was attributed in part by participants to having the opportunity to learn about the similarities and differences that existed between their own outlook and the outlook of others. A recognition of these similarities and differences has been previously shown to aid in collaboration (Hibbert and Huxham 2010).

The Processes

Although recognising differences is important, finding commonalities between the traditions can also be a means of nurturing collaboration (Hibbert and Huxham 2010). This can be done by discussion and agreeing on a strategic vision for a network. Establishing and elucidating a common vision clarifies intent, provides committees with direction and has been previously highlighted in the literature as an element of successful collaboration (Genefke and McDonald 2001, Mitchell 2011). In the three case studies, general agreement among members on strategic vision was apparent in two. Within those networks, participants stressed that this consensus contributed to success of the networks:

We do work well together and that's because we have a common goal, a common vision and that's important (Interview, Case Study A).

However, consensus can be difficult to achieve and this was apparent in the case of Network C where members expressed differing opinions on the goals of the network. Lack of agreement on what the network was and should be was highlighted by a committee member:

I did not know what we were involved in.....I did not know what we were...our vision was different (Interview, Case Study C).

Several other network members discussed a lack of consensus on a strategic vision for the network and proposed that this impacted negatively on their activities, as it resulted in stakeholders frequently working at cross-purposes. This in turn impacted negatively on the establishment of trust between different stakeholders.

Developing an atmosphere of trust and fun

Higher levels of trust and respect within teams have been linked to better communication, greater cohesiveness, (Collabor8 2012), greater satisfaction, greater commitment (Costa et al. 2001), greater co-operation and higher creativity (Barczak et al. 2010). Building trust is can be difficult and creating an environment of 'team psychological safety' within committee meetings is helpful (O'Leary 2011). This is an environment where individuals are comfortable asking questions, seeking feedback, highlighting failures and sharing information (Edmondson 2002). Maintaining an atmosphere of trust and team psychological safety within committee meetings is an on-going process:

And, that sense of safety, do you think that's there yet, or would you still feel a bit uncomfortable?

Well I think it needs to be built more. I mean as time is progressing and there is a bit of trust being built and all that.....I would be less shy about asking questions now.

So do you feel more comfortable now?

Yeah but if you got the wrong response, that could put you back into your little corner. Not that it would be intentional or anything (Interview, Case Study A).

This comment highlights the importance of group members being aware of the impact of their engagement with others within committee meetings.

Having fun was also a critical motivator in committing to committee activities:

The committee has great fun.... You know, you get involved in a voluntary committee because you like the idea of what they are doing. But if that night out is not enjoyable then you have to pack it in.....And it's always important to make sure it's not too serious because the moment it becomes unenjoyably it's hard to justify why to go. You know on a Monday evening you really don't feel like getting up and going to something. But if it's enjoyable when you get there, you'll go, so that's a huge thing. (Interview, Case Study B)

As highlighted by the above participant, enjoyment is significant when committee members are volunteers and without it, individuals are likely to question their time commitment to the network.

Achieving Clarity in roles and responsibilities

Achieving role clarity on individual roles, the role of leaders and the role of agency representatives on the committees emerged as a critical aspect of developing effective collaboration within the networks¹. Expectations may change depending on the task, so must be clearly defined.

For the most part, committee members on all three committees were generally aware of the parameters of their own role and that of others but the most clarity on individual roles was expressed by members of Network A. This they attributed to roles being defined at early meetings:

I think that's probably one of the key things to any hub and network; We very much from the outset gave this group their own tasks so everyone knew what their role was. (Interview, Case Study A)

This highlights the importance of discussions on individual roles. Similarly, the roles of leaders on the committee, usually the committee chairpersons, should be explored and defined. There was evidence in two of the committees that committee chairpersons assumed a large amount of the responsibility and workload associated with network activities, because of unspoken assumptions. Yet, each struggled with this assumed definition of their role due to the excessive workload that

¹ An individual's role in a network comprises of "the expected pattern of behaviours associated with... occupying a particular position" (Mullins 2007 p.96), for example as a committee member, committee chairperson or general member.

came with it. Similarly, committee members noted that an overdependence on a chairperson is a weakness because:

The chair shouldn't be responsible for everything for the simple reason is that people will let them do everything and when that happens the chair person ends up totally disenchanted and leaves.....You have good people being lost to various committees because they end up doing all the work (Interview, Case Study C).

Several committee members suggested that changing this dependency would be an appropriate next step.

Numerous government agencies have a remit in food development and marketing and consequently there are a number of local and national agencies that are involved in supporting food-related networks. There was local and national agency representation on two of the three committees in this study and the third committee engaged with agencies in order to seek information or funding. The contribution of agencies was valued by committee members who praised the financial and time commitment made by the agencies. Nevertheless when it came to articulating the role of each of the agencies on the committees, there was some confusion. This is not unusual in groups consisting of stakeholders from local or national agencies on one hand, and volunteers on the other. Often the difficulties relate to different styles of decision-making, different views on what constitutes success or failure, confusion about roles and a greater pressure on staff than on volunteers to produce results (Zeilstra 2003). Some of these differences were evident in this study as articulated by a participant:

Ideas and ideals were different [between agencies and volunteers] (Interview, Case Study C)

Participants highlighted the importance of regular consultation and communication between volunteers and agencies as a means of establishing clarity on the roles of the agencies on the committees.

Taking ownership

Issues of empowerment and ownership also had a sizeable bearing on effective collaboration at committee level. Collaboration is an emerging phenomenon and there are usually power disparities among stakeholder in the initial stages. This was true of the networks in this study, since one network was set up by a local development agency, one was set up by a national agency and one was set up by an elected representative, which meant that at the outset, power rested with these external agencies rather than the individual volunteers on the committee. Nonetheless, there was an expectation that empowerment of volunteer committee members was part of the collaborative process.

The ethos [of the agency] is that network development should be driven from the ground up. [The agency] does not want to lead (Interview, Case Study A)

The rhetoric of empowerment was encouraging, however there was little discussion on the topic, and as a result there was confusion around how to translate this ethos into practice.

Learning from experience

The ability of a team to achieve goals and improve outcomes has been previously linked to reflection and learning that occurs within the team (Gray 2008) and members of all three networks emphasised the importance of learning from experience. A pattern of collective critical reflection, which was particularly evident in two of the committees in the study, appeared to be linked to successful outcomes. This was due to fact that committee members whether a network event or

activity was successful or not, committee members were prepared to learn from the experience to improve subsequent activities.

I suppose you have to be very aware of the learning process. People on a committee need to be aware that just because it doesn't work the first time, it doesn't mean it's useless (Interview, Case Study B).

This meant that they enhanced the chances of successful outcomes as they ensured that they catered for their audience.

The Structures

The practical details of establishing and developing networks and network committees are often ignored, yet have been identified as some of the critical success factors in collaborative efforts in tourism (Augustyn and Knowles 2000). A number of practical elements were highlighted by participants.

Degree of formality

Although it has been shown that co-ordination can be enhanced through formalising structures and processes, for example defining communication protocols, the individuals involved in any collaboration must establish what degree of formality is appropriate for their circumstance (Jones and Lichtenstein 2008). This was highlighted by participants

Sometimes you can have a little bit too much structure and formality. But every committee is different. Some committees may need a bit more structure (Interview, Case Study B).

Committee structures in all three case studies were neither excessively formal nor excessively informal. This balance worked effectively as it allowed meetings to be conducted in an efficient manner while not stifling creativity, fun and the development of personal connections and trust.

Additionally, some participants noted the importance of integrating evaluation exercises into committee processes. Although evaluation was limited in each network, where it did occur it allowed the committees to monitor their progress and build on positive achievements. Additionally, it was seen as a way to encourage others to become involved, as highlighted by a Network A committee member:

It goes back to figures and money...You've got to be able to publish a report to say that the tourist spend went up by say 10% as a result of effort...and you have to be able to say you are a member this year and it cost you X and that was what you gained.

Participants noted that evaluation of some outcomes was straightforward, but that evaluation of others was difficult as it was difficult to know if outcomes, such as increased tourist spend in a region, could be attributed to network activities.

Size & Financing

There is some consensus across the literature that for a group of people to work effectively together as a team, there should be less than 20 people in the group. Groups with less than 20 members tend to reach agreement in decision-making while those with 20 or more members tend to splinter into subgroups with different opinions with the result that compromise is difficult and the group does not reach a consensus (Klimek et al 2009). Although network members were unaware of this research data, they recognised that having too large a committee made collaboration difficult, as demonstrated by the following comment:

Big committees get less done....Rather than having a big committee where people feel ineffectual, I think a smaller committee where people are delegated to have an area of responsibility works (Interview, Case Study B).

Nevertheless, committee members highlighted the importance of having enough members, for decisions to be representative of the varied views among the wider community. Additionally, several committee members highlighted the fact that committee meetings were never fully attended. This meant that committee membership had to be large enough that if several people were unable to attend, there were still enough members to hold an effective meeting. The committees involved in the study had between 7 and 15 members and most committee members suggested that between 10-15 members was optimal.

Study results also highlighted that being successful in sourcing funding can enhance network success as activities are easier to undertake. Financing the three networks in the study was achieved through a combination of methods including membership fees, seeking public funding and charging fees for network events.

The External Environment

Networks do not operate within a vacuum. Instead they operate within a complex sociological, historical and political environment which must be navigated when undertaking network activities. There are innumerable environmental phenomena that can impact on networks, but participants in the current study highlighted those that they considered particularly important. These were the support they received from public agencies and the impact of the level of co-ordination between agencies at a regional and national level.

Without the interest, help and funding from government agencies it is doubtful if two of the networks in this study could have existed. This emphasises the importance of the role of government agencies in regional development. Agency personnel interviewed were very aware of the importance of their role and were committed to supporting communities. Nonetheless, a recurring theme across interviews was that identifying the correct agency to approach for funding, information or advice was often difficult:

There are too many agencies, and it's too confusing. There should be one place to get all the relevant information (Interview, Case Study C).

Participants also raised issues with the lack of co-ordination, communication and co-operation between agencies at a national level. Interagency collaboration has been a feature of Irish government policy rhetoric for years, yet the public sector is still characterised by numerous independent agencies and government departments working as single entities, rather than actively collaborating. This is highlighted by one participant who, in describing an event planned by the network, commented on the lack of interest of personnel from one agency in co-operating with other agencies:

If we are trying to create something here, it shouldn't matter who gets involved. They should all be involved, but they don't want to work together... that doesn't make sense!

Thus, participants noted the inconsistency between rhetoric and practice and observed that a lack of collaboration between agencies and government departments at a national level had consequences at a local level.

DISCUSSION

The literature reveals a lack of real understanding of best practice on setting up and developing tourism networks and there is very little written on how tourism networks should be organised in order to facilitate success (Morrison et al 2004). Hall (2005) in one study on the development of wine tourism networks in New Zealand argues that the two single most important factors impacting on the development of food tourism networks in a region are a champion from the local community to drive the initiative and regular meetings to develop collaboration. The current study reveals that these factors are important but there are also many other considerations to take into account. Although regular meetings are important, *what* actually happens within those meetings, *how* it happens and *who* is there is hugely influential. Similarly, the leadership provided by champions is key, but *how* individuals go about providing leadership is equally important.

Additionally, committees do not operate within a vacuum and committee activities are influenced by the outside environment. Collaboration at government agency level is seen to be essential in the advancement of tourism development, yet across the globe, as well as in Ireland, the reality on the ground is that a lack of co-operation is more common than not (Laws et al 2011). This is worrying because, as highlighted by study participants, less than optimal collaboration between national agencies influences activities at ground level. Participants also noted that the influence was not reciprocal. In other words network members did not see how they could influence political negotiations, especially at a national level. However, one of the outcomes of collaboration can be that partners, by acting in tandem, have the potential to exercise greater influence on national policy making than when acting alone (Semone et al 2011). To do this, network committees must recognise and explore this potential.

With regard to *what* happens in meetings, findings indicated that discussions on the aims and objectives of individual committee members and how these various aims can be integrated into a clearly articulated shared strategic vision is important. Discussing and agreeing on a long-term strategic vision fosters collaboration as it provides common purpose. Furthermore, agreeing on shorter-term clear and achievable objectives in order to translate this vision into reality is an essential element of the process. This suggests that establishing agreement and clarity on aims and objectives, previously identified in the literature as a significant facilitator in collaboration (Mitchell 2011), is an important early step in the development of any food tourism network. Additionally, self-efficacy theory predicts that individual committee members are more likely to take on more responsibility and a greater workload if they expect favourable outcomes (Sanna 1992). Thus, short term objectives should be realistic and achievable. Otherwise, study findings indicate that committee members can become overwhelmed or lose interest. Similarly, evaluation can be difficult as it is not always possible to quantify the changes attributable to network activities (Rossi et al 2004). Designing achievable aims can make the process of evaluation easier as they provide a benchmark, against which progress can be measured. Aims and objectives should not be viewed as static statements, but should be continually revisited and updated. Constant re-evaluation ensures that committee members are familiar with the goals they have set, ensuring structure and purpose in their collaborative efforts.

Additionally, it is essential that the roles of all committee members must be discussed, defined and redefined as activities progress in order that all committee members take responsibility for decision-making and actions. This is particularly important when there is a paid co-ordinator, so that the potential benefits that collaborative decision-making brings are not negated by decision-making and actions being undertaken by a single person. Findings also indicate that effective communication between agency staff and volunteers is essential in achieving clarity on the role of agencies in the collaboration. Networks in this study embraced a rhetoric of community empowerment but public agencies espousing community empowerment must be cognisant that this is an approach that may

entail slower progress, and prioritisation of different objectives. Likewise, volunteers seeking empowerment must be prepared for the responsibility and work that comes with it.

One of the advantages of network membership is the potential to learn from each other (Kelliher et al 2009). Study results indicated that openness to learning, evidenced by reflection on and a critical examination of committee practices, contributed to the successful functioning of the networks. It allowed committees to recognise the changing nature of the environment within which they operate. Without this, groups can become locked into patterns based on past successes that do not take account of the changing world around them (Cropper and Palmer 2008). However, it is not enough to critically examine network activities (such as what worked or what didn't work in a food festival or network event). Committees must also be prepared to examine how they work together. In other words, they must reflect on processes, not just actions.

Findings also indicate that it is also important for committee members to recognise that collaborative ventures shift and change with time with some periods being more productive than others, and committee members should acknowledge that these changes are normal. There should also be mechanisms in place to ensure that group learning is retained if individual members leave. Evaluation of activities, maintenance of comprehensive written records and overlap in membership terms are examples of such mechanisms.

Who is involved in a tourism network committee is also significant. Consistency in committee membership and committee meeting attendance is important. In other words, even if committee members leave the committee, there must be some overlap with some committee members remaining from one year to the next. Additionally, meetings should be held regularly and although all members do not have to attend all meetings but there must be consistency in attendance so that the same matters do not get discussed repeatedly.

There are numerous stakeholder involved in tourism ventures and study results indicate that when setting up a food tourism network, it is important to acknowledge that individuals will have different motivations for getting involved. Thus, network goals should include benefits to individuals as well as the wider region. Additionally, differences between sectors must be acknowledged and discussed in order to overcome any difficulties with different attitudes and backgrounds which are commonly highlighted in the literature (Mitchell 2011) and to capitalize on the different perspectives and experiences of committee members. This acknowledgement and discussion is dependent on the third feature of committee meetings: *how* they are conducted.

Meetings can be conducted in a variety of ways. They can be structured with various degrees of formality and Individual committees must decide on the appropriate balance for them. No matter what the degree of formality, however, group members should celebrate progress, listen attentively and provide constructive feedback to others, ensure they do not dominate discussions, take part in decision-making, and encourage others to do the same (Nembhard and Edmondson 2006). Ensuring that team psychological safety continues to build can be facilitated by supportive leadership where chairpersons encourage input from all group members, establish ground rules that encourage respect within committee meetings, acknowledge their own mistakes when they make them, use positive language, encourage active listening and provide constructive feedback and ensure that all committee members have a voice in decision-making, creating the team vision and agreeing common goals. Discussion and agreeing on a method of dealing with conflict can also help in the development of a team atmosphere where people feel comfortable engaging in discussions. Team psychological safety can also be cultivated by developing an understanding of each other's roles, both inside and outside the committee (Faraj and Yan 2009, Nembhard and Edmondson 2006, O'Leary 2011).

Additionally, enjoyment as a significant element in successful collaboration is rarely mentioned within the literature (Von Friedrichs Grangsjö and Gummesson 2006, Collabor8 2012). Nevertheless, study results indicated that enjoyment was a critical motivator for volunteering and remaining on a committee, suggesting that this is something to take into account when setting up food tourism networks.

In summary, ensuring the sustainability of food tourism networks is a complex process, dependent on a number of interrelated practices based on establishing clarity, trust and a sense of ownership within the core committee. Effective communication and an openness to examining committee processes are at the heart of these practices.

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